

March 1, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

I'm writing this testimony to help you gain insight on the importance of passing the Deaf Child Bill of Rights, HB 5357. I'm proposing this testimony as a Deaf individual who has endured all of the hardships that the Deaf Child Bill of Rights will prevent others from facing if it passes. As a Deaf child, I attended Southington Public Schools. While I'm proud to be a graduate of Southington High School, I have to be honest... obtaining an education in Southington's public school system, as a Deaf child was not easy. In fact, it was very hard, demeaning, and oppressing at times.

My parents found out that I was Deaf when I was 4 years old, just prior to entering the school system. Upon entering the public school system, my family began to wage a never-ending battle for me to obtain equal communication access, accommodations in the classroom, and a support system in school. They continued to fight this battle each year as I entered a new grade and got new teachers. I continued this fight and advocated on my own behalf when I was old enough to attend my own PPT meetings (Planning and Placement Team). My family faced these same challenges as they fought for the same access for my younger sister who has a hearing loss too.

Every year, my family not only fought to make sure we had equal access to communication and accommodations in the classroom, but also for support services, access to more challenging academic classes, and for equal opportunities to become involved in extracurricular activities and sports. They fought at all levels and joined as many parent organizations as they could, even the Board of Education in Southington, so that they could ensure improved access for myself, as well as other children in the district. They also introduced my sister and I to deaf peers and role models to show us we could do anything. Another thing the school system did not have the resources to do.

Despite our constant battles, in middle school and high school I was still told by various school professionals that I could not take honors courses, get credit for the Gifted and Talented Program I was part of, and that I could not take a foreign language, psychology, sociology, or any other advanced/college prep elective course. Worst of all, I was told by my own high school guidance counselor these words I will never forget... That I would never succeed in college because I'm Deaf. I didn't listen to them,

nor would my parents let me, but I did have to endure listening to words no child should ever have to hear by someone who is supposed to encourage them to reach for their dreams.

I was also not allowed to learn or use American Sign Language in the public school system; a language that my parents supported me in learning from the time they first learned I had a hearing loss. Rather, I had to wait until I enrolled in college to master this language. As you can imagine, this new language allowed me to communicate more easily and opened many doors for me, especially while my hearing loss continued to progress.

After high school I went on to college. I enrolled at Northwestern Community College where I obtained my Deaf Studies Certification and learned American Sign Language (ASL). I utilized ASL interpreters in the classroom and went on to get my BA in Criminology at Central CT State University where I got elected into an honor society and graduated with Departmental Honors in 2000. From there, I went on to UCONN where I graduated in 2002 with a Masters in Social Work and concentration in Policy and Planning and certification in Family Studies.

I'm now working as a State Coordinator for the Deaf and Education Service Specialist for the State of Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS), which is under the new Bureau of Rehabilitative Services. I've been with BRS for 10 years now, first as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor for the Deaf in Bridgeport, CT, then as a Transition Specialist working in New Haven High Schools with inner city youths with disabilities. For the last two years I have been in my current position in BRS's administrative office in Hartford. So much for being told I could never succeed in college...

Sadly, there are many Deaf and hard of hearing students who still have to fight the same battles my parents fought 20 years ago for me today. Now that we have statistics, the impact is even clearer than ever... In 2011, between 71% and 81% of Deaf and hard of hearing students did **NOT** pass the CT Mastery Tests and CAPT tests. These students are average and above average intelligent and capable Deaf youths, just like myself, who are failing. This statistic is very scary, yet I see it everyday as these youths come to my Agency seeking services to help them prepare to enter the workforce right after high school. These youths should be preparing for college, seeking careers as professionals, and should possess strong self-esteem, self-confidence, and the self-advocacy skills they need as they enter adulthood... But, they are not because they weren't provided services during school and access to academic enrichment in the communication

mode of their choice and delivered by professionals who are experts in the field of Deafness and Hearing Losses.

If passed, The Deaf Child Bill of Rights HB 5357 will change this. It will require that all Deaf and Hard of Hearing student's IEP (Individualized Education Plan) include a Language and Communication plan that will underline the student's primary mode of communication, whether ASL, oral, or both. The Language and Communication Plan will also address and specify:

- Availability of peers and role models of the student's language/communication mode
- All educational options available for the student
- Qualifications of teachers and other personnel and proficiency in the student's language/communication mode
- Accessibility of academic instruction, school services and extracurricular activities
- Assistive devices/services; communication and physical environment accommodations

Lastly, the Deaf Child Bill of Rights will not only help Deaf youths in schools today, but will also help hard of hearing youths as they become adults and their hearing loss progresses. There are many individuals with hearing losses, like my own sister who fought the same battles I fought their whole lives, yet never had the opportunity at a young age to learn American Sign Language or learn other ways to communicate other than through using hearing aids. My sister, along with many others who were once hard of hearing are now losing their residual hearing and hearing aids no longer work for them. They are left scrambling to find new ways to communicate all while working as productive members of our society and communicating through whatever words they can lip-read.

Imagine this... You're a well respected hard of hearing professional for a large company with a Masters degree you obtained after graduating near the top of your college class. All of sudden one day you wake up and can't hear anything anymore and you find yourself struggling to communicate with your co-workers and peers. Yes, you may have had a hearing loss your whole life, but you've trusted and have been told by educators you don't need to learn American Sign Language or any other way to

communicate. You've also never been introduced to assistive technology, Deaf professionals and peers, or resources that could have assisted you if your hearing loss suddenly progressed. Sound frustrating? It is. And depressing. Far too often, these folks end up isolating themselves because they simply do not know how to communicate. Sadly, this happens a lot more than we think and I see these struggles of many professionals who were hard of hearing growing up everyday in my line of work.

I want to thank you for taking the time to read my testimony. With your support of this bill, no deaf or hard of hearing child in Connecticut should have to face the same obstacles I did. Their families will not have to fight on a constant basis for access and support in their local schools. All deaf and hard of hearing children will have equal access to qualified professionals in their schools that will support their academic, personal, and social development. These children, just like I did, have the potential to be contributing members of society, but simply need to be provided the tools to help them reach their potential.

I hope you understand the importance of the Deaf Child Bill of Rights, HB 5357. Your support of this bill will not only make a huge difference for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing children today, but it will also show your support of the future of these children.

Thanks again for your time

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